

Pa decided to write about her life in the refugee camp in Thailand. For the first half of the piece, she wrote about the geography and structure of the camp. For the second half, she wrote about her personal experiences of what it was like to live there.

~Allison Sladek, Tutor

Refugee Camp

By Pa Houa Thao

I was born in a refugee camp in Thailand. Living there for 13 years, I never questioned my status and my desires. I did not have any educational background. I did not know that the United States and other countries existed. I did not know that the world was round and the sun goes around the Earth. I did not know anybody outside the camp. I did not know. But I know that I once lived in a secret refugee camp, which I will fail to locate it on the map of Thailand if you ask me. And if you ask me to describe it, I will show you.

It was a tropical land somewhere in Thailand and was built for refugees. It was somewhat similar to the Nazi Holocaust. The environment was horrible. Information about the camp, its land, and its population were never contributed to the residents. Perhaps, it had; but I wouldn't know. Residents had very little knowledge about the world. The camp police treated the Hmong residents badly. Hmong people were fenced inside the wall, so they could not escape and they were not allowed to farm or go outside the camp boundary. Residents who went outside the camp fence would be arrested. If they got caught, the camp police would put them in jails. In several cases, the Thai police would strike Hmong residents badly until they bled.

The houses were very poor. The roofs of the houses were made out of shingle and were held by wood poles. Hmong people shared beds with mice and other insects on the ground. Little girls and little boys wouldn't know what had bitten them. Sometimes, when it rained very hard, one can hear and feel the roof of the apartments screaming to tear apart. All apartments were identical. They were built into rows. Each row was named by a number. There were more than 100 apartments. One apartment can fit up to 20 families including both sides. Apartments were lined up horizontal and vertical inside the camp, leaving the middle area to be open. The very top of the camp was the main exit to other places in Thailand. Offices, markets, school, hospitals, and a few apartments were located near the exit door. The rest of the area was where Hmong people socialized

A long mystery unknown river divided the camp into an uneven half, which the only way to get to the other side was by bridges. There were three bridges. The main bridge was located in the middle and connected to the "Tsav Npas" or "soccer field." The other two bridges were located on each side of the river, divided by the middle bridge. The soccer field was divided into several sections.

The very top-left of the soccer field was a school for grade one to grade six. The school was also built with a fence and with the classrooms in a row, lined up like a hexagon shape to match the fence, leaving the middle spot to be opened. I attended school in there from grade one to grade two.

School was difficult. I remember it very well. I was a smart girl. I did very well in school. My dad taught me how to read and write every night. I was elected to be the classroom's president with a vice-president and a secretary. A president's job was to warn students when the teacher presented. I recalled saying, "please stand up" and classmates obeyed. A vice-president's job was to report anything that happened in the room and a secretary ordered students to clean the classroom. However, reading materials was different, but the punishments were even rougher. The teacher wrote sentences on the chalkboard and he or she asked each row of students to read out loud to the class. The row that failed to pronounce words would get punished. One time, my row was called to read. There were five of us. We failed to pronounce the words. The teacher asked us to line up and to put our right hand on each other's shoulder. He asked the first person to twist the next person's ear and went on to the next person. I once asked a friend to slowly twist my ear and I'll do the same to him. But when my turn was up, the teacher told me if I did not twist his ear hard, I will get double twist. So, I twisted it very hard. I could see his ear was all red.

Late students also get punished. I was late too. The teacher told me to run around the school, pick up two big rocks, and bring it back to the classroom. I did. After that, the teacher told me to kneel down in front of the classmates and spread my arms like Jesus Christ. He put a chalk on my head and two rocks on each of my hand. If both of my hands became unbalance, I got whipped. If the chalk on my head fell, I got whipped. Couple hours passed by, I was released and asked to say I would not be late again to the class. Fingernails were often checked as punishment. Out of no where, the teacher would ask students to lift their hand up. If their fingernails were long and dirty, the teacher would use a ruler to hit the tip of the fingernail very hard. Whenever this happen, I used my saliva to clean my fingernail. Teachers often used a long, sharp wooden stick to hit students. I was hit badly during my second grade of school. I climbed over the wooden fence, and never attended school again. The punishment was too harsh for me to handle. I dropped out of school when I was nine year old.

After I dropped out of school, I spent everyday playing on the streets to gather a bunch of friends and performed various roles. I was the only child and being the only child meant I got pretty much anything I wanted. Yet, there were disadvantages of being the only child: my mother wanted me to be this and my dad wanted me to that. I was a tomboy back in the camp. I had a lot of friends and we played all kind of games such as jump-rope, hopscotch, shooting marbles, hide and seek, tag, playing house, shooting seeds, puppet plays, playing rock, paper, and scissor, and many more. Each game had different rules, each rule must be obeyed by the players, and players must have skills to win. Players were competitive. Players could recruit members of other gangs if they have skills. I was one of the talented players that once lead a group of my own. From jump-rope to puppet plays, I conquered them all. Playmates in my team looked upon and cheered me as a valuable player. I often viewed myself as their captain. For instances, when playing games with other gangs, I was selected as the head leader to play rock, paper, and scissor against the other team's captain. From here, if I won, I would be able to select any member in both groups to be on my team. I remember we were playing jump-rope against a fat boy and his teammates. He had chosen my playmates, which certain one did not want to be on his team. We could not come to an agreement; therefore, we fought. I remember stretched him up. I also remember when I cut myself on the foot. My playmates and I tried to climb over a fence into the rehab center. When I climbed to the top of the fence, I jumped down to the other side of the fence without looking at what was below. Being barefoot and not

looking, I jumped down to the dirty ground, my arch of my foot got stuck into pieces of glass. The last thing I remember seeing was blood. I probably fainted. When I woke up, I was at the hospital and had seven stitches on the wound.

The top-right of the soccer field had offices. These offices were built with tall walls around it. Hmong people work in there with Thai people. They were in charge of food distribution, they kept records of the residents, they did paper work to America, and they provided information about the camp. There were beautiful gardens inside the offices. I recalled a time when my girlfriends and I climbed over the fence to play hide-and-seek. I tripped over an electric wire, which was hidden under a tree, and I injured my left arm. Below the office, an empty house was build for food storage.

Thai people did not allow Hmong people to farm. As the result, Hmong people suffered from not having enough food. They became very skinny due to starvation. I used to think that Thai people were very kind to provide us food, but later on in the United States, I discovered that the food we received was originally from the UN (United Nations). Whenever the UN donated food to the Hmong residents, Thai leader had already selected the good ones and donated them the left over. However, when food was donated, Hmong leaders from each apartment would go to the storage house to receive food and distribute it to the residents.

The bottom-left of the soccer field was an open spot for activities and events that Hmong residents held. New Year celebration was common among the Hmong people. Every year, Hmong residents celebrated, practiced traditional beliefs, and participated in activities such as ball toss. It was played by boys and girls who were planning to get married. The boys and girls lined up in two rows facing each other, about 20 to 50 feet apart. The players threw a ball back and forth to each other. According to this game, multiple men are allowed to cross over to surround a woman, but women cannot do the same back to a man. Most residents' life took place either on the streets or on the soccer field. Hmong people resided in Chengkhan for many years. I spent half of my childhoold in this refugee camp.

Generation after generation grew up in Chengkhan. Chengkhan was isolated from the rest of the Thai population. It was a camp located in the middle of no where and nobody could reach it. For many years, my parents, my grandparents, and their great-grandparents lived as refugees. How did they become refugees? Researchers indicate that Hmong people were originally from China. Due to wars and disagreements between the Chinese and the Hmong, Hmong people relocated themselves. Some moved to Laos and escaped to Thailand. During the Vietnam War, many Hmong people sided with the United States Central Intelligence (CIA) to defeat Vietnamese. After losing the war, Americans left many Hmong people behind. From here, Hmong people moved to wherever they would find safety. Some Hmong people came to America in 1975; others stayed behind and suffered from bad condition. My grandparents escaped to another refugee camp in Thailand known as Vib Nab, pronounce as Wee Naii. From there, my father and mother met and they became husband and wife. Shortly, after their marriage, the Thai Leaders of Vib Nab relocated hundreds of Hmong people and sent my parents to Chengkhan, a refugee camp in Thailand, where my mother gave birth to me.

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